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People think of others as more prosocial when they are motivated by aesthetic goals vs. instrumental goals

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Abstract

People expect others to take efficient paths toward goals. Inefficiency changes how we categorize actions, leading us to see actions as play (Chu & Schulz, 2020), or as movements performed for their own intrinsic value (Schachner & Carey, 2013). Here we find that performing actions for their own value (e.g., aesthetic value), versus for instrumental purposes, provides social information about others. In a pre-registered experiment (N=360), participants judged which character in a pair was more compassionate, or more selfish/manipulative. For one key pair (among distractors), both characters performed the same activity (music, painting, eating, exercising, math, being in nature), and we manipulated why: Either for its own aesthetic value, or as a means-to-an-end (instrumental value). Across all activities, aesthetically-motivated characters were judged as more compassionate and less selfish/manipulative than instrumentally-motivated characters (p 's<0.01). Aesthetically-motivated behavior may signal others' emotionality more so than instrumentally-motivated activities, driving inferences about prosociality.